

The Ukrainian Pravytsya: step forward, 33 steps back

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Ironically, nowadays some new political groups can only further political split-ups and confrontation, making the difficult process of political communication - so much discussed and allegedly sought by Ukrainian parties and movements - even more complicated. The challenges derive from typical Ukrainian «growth problems»: the problem of leadership and (often groundless) claims of too many politicians to be chiefs, the problem of unclear perspectives, undefined platforms and inability to maneuver between the «cliffs» of the Ukrainian political sea.

Apparently, the condition has entered its acute phase lately. The use of slogans about unification of the right-wingers seems to become the single sense for existence of some political formations that have adopted the unification rhetoric, gradually transformed it into a national-political myth and their own «professional specialization» to justify their existence and operation.

Unfortunately, the newly established association of political parties and NGOs, the Ukrainian Pravytsya (i.e., «the Right Hand»), may be regarded as an example of such misunderstanding. The day of establishment of the Ukrainian Pravytsya, January 21, is the Day of Sobornost (unification) of Ukraine. The choice of the date was probably meant to emphasize the general symbolism and importance of the event. However, the event itself failed to become significant - unless you treat like significant the collectively declared agenda and the signature procedure performed by the forum participants. On the surface the assembly did look impressive: it was attended by almost 1,000 representatives of 11 political parties and over 20 NGOs. The resulting new entity, given the allegorical name of the «Ukrainian Pravytsya», included the Ukrainian People's Rukh (Yuri Kostenko), the Batkivshchyna (Yulia Tymoshenko), the Ukrainian Republican Party, the Sobor (Anatoly Matvienko), the Social-National Party (Oleg Tyahnybok), the Party of Ukrainian Unity, the Ukrainian Conservative Republican Party (Stepan Khmara), the Christian People's Union, and the Party of Support for National Manufacturers. The association was joined by a number of politicized NGOs: the Prosvita Society, the Ukrainian Cossack Society, the Union of Ukrainian Officers, the All-Ukrainian Veterans' Union, the Young Rukh, the Ukrainian Student Union, and the National Olena Teliha Women's Organization. The event received an additional focus and the veil of political intrigue in the context of recent dismissal of the Batkivshchyna leader Yulia Tymoshenko from the position of Vice Prime Minister for the Fuel and Energy Complex. The dismissal was condemned by the assembly as an «anti-Ukrainian provocation». The general sentiment of the Ukrainian Pravytsya regarding Yulia Tymoshenko's dismissal suggests that the new association has a strong chance to be treated as an opposition by the President of Ukraine, but not by Prime Minister Victor Yushchenko who has long been viewed by the right-wingers as the most suitable candidate to become the leader of the united Ukrainian right.

The new stage of the alliance between Yulia Tymoshenko's Batkivshchyna and Yuri Kostenko's Rukh is likely to deal yet another blow to the ailing parliamentary majority and to become a step towards shaping a majority eager to back Prime Minister Yushchenko. The «other majority» is aware of the challenge: as First Vice Speaker Victor Medvedchuk put it, «such participants of the association [i.e., the Ukrainian Pravytsya] as the UNR [i.e., Kostenko's Rukh] and the Batkivshchyna party are supporters of the current government and, in particular, its leader Victor Yushchenko» (Den, January 24, 2001). Hence, the contradictions, currently experienced by the parliamentary majority, are likely to deteriorate.

Symptomatically, members of «the third Rukh», a formation with an ambitious title of the «People's Rukh of Ukraine for Unification» led by Bohdan Boiko, established on November 25, 2000 (see UCIPR Research Update No. 199 at <http://www.ucipr.kiev.ua>) were not invited to the forum. In November 2000 the «third Rukh» declared its goal to be unification of the «pieces» of the formerly powerful single Rukh organization. The demonstrative neglect of the «third Rukh» by the Ukrainian right-wingers stressed again that they did not view the ambitious structure and its claims as legitimate.

The Ukrainian Pravytsya, as the forum participants emphasized, aimed at taking part jointly in

forthcoming election campaigns at all levels. While the declaration was signed by organizations that differ substantially in their level of influence and integration into the current political power structures, the block is to be coordinated by the Council of Heads of member organizations who will take turns in performing the leadership of the Council. The «founding fathers» of the Ukrainian Pravytsya have declared the goal that is both noble and hard to achieve: to «enhance and coordinate activities of center-right parties for full implementation of the Ukrainian idea that was the determining one during the gain of independence» (Holos Ukrainy, January 23, 2001). According to the forum participants, nowadays Ukraine is not being built as a nation state, but as a postcolonial state entity, controlled by foreign capital and influenced by de-nationalized, cosmopolitan clans.

The event could be seen as the implementation of the long-standing political strife for a strong block of Ukrainian right-wing parties, should it not display a number of visible problems. The principle drawback of the Ukrainian Pravytsya - that could be predicted well before the association forum - was the refusal of the Party of Reforms and Order (Victor Pynzenyk), the People's Rukh of Ukraine (Hennady Udovenko), the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists (Slava Stetsko), and the Republican Christian Party (Mykhailo Porovsky) to attend. While the presence of the Republican Christian Party would not have played any significant role in the forum and would be needed only to add yet another signature to the list, the decision of the Party of Reforms and Order (PRO), the Rukh (Udovenko) and the CUN was a serious blow to the credibility of the new block. Some representatives of the Ukrainian Pravytsya are well aware of the problem: for instance, Oleksa Hudyma, MP, publicly stated that «the forum <...> cannot be described as completely successful, for the PRO, the Rukh and the CUN did not take part in it» (Vysoky Zamok, January 23, 2001).

Meanwhile, in December 2000 chairman of the Ukrainian Rukh Yuri Kostenko stated in Lviv that the Rukh, the PRO and the CUN planned to take part in the unification forum. At that point he «was considering two possible concepts of formation of the «Ukrainian Pravytsya» (Vysoky Zamok, January 23, 2001) - as Lviv-based observers put it. The first concept involved formation of a coalition around the core block - naturally, the Rukh (Kostenko), the PRO, the CUN, and the Rukh (Udovenko). The second concept was based on the assumption that the core parties of the block would be the Rukh (Kostenko), the Batkivshchyna and the Sobor - which, in fact, happened later. Due to personal contradictions between leaders of the parties seen as possible constituents of the core, the two concepts were mutually contradictory, and the ideal association of all of the «core parties» was hardly realistic. For instance, when asked to comment on the activities of the Rukh (Udovenko), leader of the Sobor Anatoly Matvienko expressed his opinion laconically: «Shame!» (Vysoky Zamok, November 28, 2000). He went on to argue that «what Yulia [Tymoshenko] is doing today is good. She must be supported». At about the same time Hennady Udovenko, commenting on prospects for formation of a coalition of right-wing forces, stated unequivocally: «we are not negotiating with the Batkivshchyna. So far we have only been talking with the Ukrainian People's Rukh about joining our block. Yuri Ivanovych [Kostenko] raises the issue somewhat broader. But the negotiations are in process» (Ukraina Moloda, November 30, 2000). The «negotiation process», however, seems in deadlock as a logical development of relations between the «Pravytsya» and the Rukh (Udovenko) - PRO - CUN. Apparently, the Batkivshchyna party has acted as a strong buffer that obstructed the reconciliation of the Rukh (Kostenko) with the PRU- PRO - CUN block.

At the end of December 1999, after the 2nd congress of the All-Ukrainian Association Batkivshchyna and the election of Yulia Tymoshenko as the party leader by 343 out of 344 delegates, she named the Rukh (Kostenko) as the one force in the Ukrainian parliament with which the Batkivshchyna was prepared to participate in the elections. According to Tymoshenko, the Rukh Kostenko included «many young promising politicians who have convincing ideology» (Vechirniy Kyiv, December 21, 1999). She also announced that the Batkivshchyna had been negotiating a possible alliance with the Rukh (Kostenko) since October 1999, and that the negotiations could result in creation of a «tough block of factions» which would «become a symbol: the East and the West of Ukraine are able to come to terms». «We are also negotiating joint participation in the 2002 election,» Yulia Tymoshenko said (Vysoky Zamok, December 21, 1999). Apparently, little by little the «symbol» began to materialize in a declaration of intent to establish a would-be political block.

The consolidation of the Batkivshchyna and the Rukh (Kostenko) was accompanied with efforts to facilitate the establishment of a broader right-wing political block. At the end of February 2000 Yuri Kostenko announced: «our aim is to create a strong tight wing, and regardless of when the [next] election takes place, we will be working towards the establishment of a block of parties» (Region,

February 28, 2000). According to Kostenko, the Central Provid [i.e., Board] of the Rukh negotiated primarily with the Batkivshchyna, the Democratic Party of Ukraine, the Yednist («Unity»), the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, the Rukh (Udoenko), the Party of Labor, the PRO, the Republican Christian Party, the Ukrainian Republican Party and the Sobor.

Hence, for almost two years we could see several parallel processes of consolidation of Ukrainian right-wing political parties. However, it appeared that the complex negotiation processes and relatively sincere declarations were not meant to meet in a logical political point: a common consolidation forum.

Yet, «the period of talks and declarations is over. We did not take part in the Forum for we see no sense in going back to only talks about unification,» said Victor Pynzenyk (Chas, January 26, 2001), commenting on his party's decision not to join the Ukrainian Pravysya. This position was caused primarily by the fact that the three major right-wing political parties, the Rukh (Udoenko), the PRO and the CUN, established their own block on November 29, 2000 «with the goal to win the election», as Pynzenyk put it. «That is why, already having positive experience of cooperation, we stand for consolidation of the right-wing forces and [we] are prepared for unification, but only provided [that there are] clearly defined conditions of future activity» (Chas, January 26, 2001) - chairman of the People's Rukh of Ukraine (PRU) Hennady Udoenko added.

Noteworthy, at the end of November 2000 the three parties signed an agreement «On Principle Grounds of Activity of the Block of the PRU, the PRO and the CUN». The Agreement involved «development and adoption of joint program documents of the block of the PRU, the PRO and the Congress; coordination of actions of the member parties by means of conducting joint actions and approval of joint documents; formation of a common election list of the PRU - PRO - Congress block for the forthcoming election to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, creation of a common parliamentary faction.» According to PRO chairman Victor Pynzenyk, the Agreement contained «provisions for common grounds for activities of the three parties and the principle of formation of a common election block» (Chas, December 1, 2000).

The leaders of the «right three» are unanimous in stating that the block is «open for other parties» to join, but the block, according to Victor Pynzenyk, is «possible on concrete foundations only: shared ideological principles, a common election platform, a common election list» (Chas, January 26, 2001). Similarly, the Ukrainian Pravysya announced itself to be open for further association and the permanent negotiation process. Yet, members of the PRU - PRO - Congress block describe the establishment of the Ukrainian Pravysya as an «entropy moment» - as Taras Chornovil put it, arguing that «the establishment of the Ukrainian Pravysya association (joined, in particular, by the Rukh (Kostenko), the Batkivshchyna, the URP) with the involvement of small, often non-constructive parties» «hinders the enlargement of the right block» (Den, January 26, 2001).

It is rather difficult to see any «clearly defined activity» or consolidated positions even if the Ukrainian Pravysya has some. The problem is not limited to election issues, linked to political finance, establishment of common election teams and formation of a common election list of participants of the new entity (which alone can prove to be rather dramatic). The member organizations' perspectives and actions often display critical lack of mutual understanding and coordination. For instance, some members of the Pravysya have been active critics of Leonid Kuchma and the power establishment in general in connection with the «Tapegate», and the Sobor was one of the key players in the «Ukraine without Kuchma» action. «We call on all members of the Verkhovna Rada to put an end, finally, to the cynical lawlessness and lies, responsibility for which falls on President Leonid Kuchma and his circle,» the Sobor's statement read (Silski Visti, January 10, 2001). In this context, it was somewhat strange to see a national «defense and sports organization», the Ukrainian Cossacks led by Ivan Bilas, MP, to join the supposedly oppositional Ukrainian Pravysya. In early January 2001 the statement, made «on behalf of the 175,000-strong community» of «Ukrainian Cossacks» demanded «firmly» on all «citizens, together with the Cossacks, to uproot in Ukraine the poisonous remainders of colonialism, shameful attempts to slander its legitimate authorities, the nationally elected President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma, the abuse of spiritual sacred objects of the Ukrainian nation» (Uriadovi Kurrier, January 13, 2001). No comment.

A major challenge to the new alliance in the context of the likely focus of the Ukrainian Pravysya on the forthcoming 2002 parliamentary election is the issue of shaping the common election list. One can only imagine the difficulties of securing every member organization's agreement on the list that would

please every organization's ambitions and meet their election potential. Most of the 30-plus members of the Ukrainian Pravytsya have their own interests - which is well understood by the new entity and by the PRU-PRO-CUN block. According to one of the Rukh (Udoenko) leaders Les Taniuk, «not all of the participants of the new union will «endure» when the issue of a common political list comes to the fore.» Instead, the major «right three» do not want any extra «test on the agreement between our parties, while the Ukrainian Pravytsya is only a preliminary association that has not discussed the very issues of common funding, common [campaign] staff,» Les Taniuk argues (Vysoky Zamok, January 23, 2001). With proper campaign planning, advertising and funding the PRU-PRO-CUN block is most likely to overcome the 4-percent «pass» threshold, so far prescribed by the new parliamentary election law (though not signed by the President yet).

Apparently, the Ukrainian right-wingers are going to experience more lasting talks, deadlocks and new alliances (or statements of the necessity to form some). The only hope is that they stop following the pattern described by a Marxist classic: «step forward, two steps back». Otherwise there will be too many «entropy moments» that will have a damaging effect on right-wingers' election performance.